

## Rock 'n' role-playing: Riffs from Bellevue

### Knockout Drops' singer debuts his theatrical 'Escape'

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Chris Campion's idea of a good joke goes something like this: Didja hear the one about the alcoholic rock singer who threatened to kill himself? He got sent to a mental institution!

Not funny, you say? Then you haven't heard Campion tell it.

Campion, the 39-year-old singer for the veteran New York

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bar-band Knockout Drops, is the subject of his own jokes in “Escape From Bellevue & Other Stories,” a tough-to-categorize new show directed by Horton Foote Jr. “Bellevue” combines Campion’s highly personal monologues, rough-edged rock songs with his band and a few prankish video skits for good measure. The result is a 90-minute journey through crippling addiction, a fragile recovery and — as long as we’re being honest — some hilariously good times.



NEWSDAY PHOTO/ARI MINTZ

Chris Campion performs his “Escape From Bellevue & Other Stories” at the Paradise Factory.

“If you’re having some troubles, you might find it really inspirational,” Campion says. “Or it might make you want to run out and score an eight-ball. Either one.”

The show is built around Campion’s three visits to New York’s famous psychiatric hospital; he boasts of being the first since 1963 to escape from its walls. Bellevue couldn’t verify that claim, but no matter — the story is a doozy, complete with a clever plan, a clueless patsy and a slapstick getaway. It’s the desperate act of an addict, but in Campion’s show, even the lowest points in his life come off as high comedy.

A Huntington native with a gift for storytelling and an actor’s flair for voices and mimicry, Campion has long peppered his band’s live shows with impromptu vignettes. While touring England recently, he decided to explain the story behind “Wrong Turn,” a song that begins, “I woke up one day/To a man bouncing an imaginary basketball”.

“It was the first time I’d intimated that I’d even been in Bellevue,” Campion recalls. “And I was a little afraid — I mean, this is kind of a personal story. But it just kind of fell out of my mouth.”

Campion initially envisioned “Bellevue” as a lighthearted comedy act and sought advice from Foote, a onetime actor and son of the well-known dramatist (though Campion knew him better as the owner of Tavern on Jane in the West Village). Foote agreed to direct the show, but insisted that Campion explore the darker corners of his life.

“I never paid attention to how much pain he was in, because he was just my funny drinking guy,” Foote explains. “I told him finally, ‘You’ve got to go through what you went through up on stage.’”

Campion did exactly that on opening night last week. Between the howls of laughter were shocked murmurs from the crowd. Even one of Campion’s band members was startled to find himself named in a less-than-flattering anecdote. And this weekend, Campion says, his parents may show up.

“I’m a little nervous,” he admits. But he adds, “They know. Who do you think picked me up from the loony bin?”

**WHEN&WHERE:** “Escape From Bellevue & Other Stories” at 9 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Jan. 14 at Paradise Factory Theater, 64 E. Fourth St., Manhattan. Tickets are \$20. Call 212-868-4444 or go to [www.knockoutdrops.com](http://www.knockoutdrops.com).